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The Naming of British Columbia

Ged Martin

Selecting a name for the gold rush colony of British Columbia, although apparently trivial, embarrassed the government, threatened to become the focus for a groundswell of opposition to the whole idea of establishing a new colony, and offers a curious sidelight on the role of the Crown.[1]

On 24 June 1858 Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, the Colonial Secretary in Lord Derby's second ministry, wrote to the Queen to inform her that "in consequence of the recent discovery of Gold in the Neighbourhood of Fraser's River, on the Western Coast of British North America, rendering expedient the immediate establishment of Civil Government," the government had decided "to erect at once a New Colony there." Parliament had to authorize this, "& it is desirable that the name of the new Colony shall be inserted in the Bill." Since the measure was to be introduced within a week, the procedure was slapdash. In asking the Queen to select a name, Lytton informed her that explorers had used the name "New Caledonia," but did point out that the name had been used elsewhere, most notably for "the chief island of the New Hebrides Group in the South Seas where the French have lately signified their intention to form an establishment." He added that the names New Cornwall and New Hanover had also been applied to parts of the coast by some mapmakers.[2] While the monarch retained a significant role in mid-nineteenth century government, this hardly extended to acting as a cartographical research institute for the Colonial Office. On 27 June the Queen informed her minister that she had settled on New Caledonia as the most generally accepted name.[3]

At this stage, prospects for the new colony looked good. *The Times* lauded Vancouver's Island as "without exception, the most desirable portion of the surface of the earth" and urged the government to take it from the hands of the Hudson's Bay Company before an influx of

[1]Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto, 1958), pp. 148-151.

[2]Lytton to Queen Victoria, 24 June 1858, Windsor Castle, Royal Archives, RA/B17/13. Material from The Royal Archives is published by gracious permission of H.M. The Queen.

[3]Queen Victoria to Lytton, 27 June 1858, Hertfordshire County Record Office, Lytton Papers, D/EK 027.

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gold diggers brought Californian anarchy and the repudiation of the Oregon treaty. It seemed unlikely that anyone would challenge the bill for the Government of New Caledonia—a name which *The Times* greeted as "euphonious" and even "novel."[4] On 8 July, however, during second reading, Henry Labouchere, Lytton's Whig predecessor as Colonial Secretary, queried the choice of New Caledonia. He claimed to have spoken to "several gentlemen connected with the colony," none of whom seemed to know of the name; yet there was a large island in the neighbourhood of Australia belonging to France which bore that name already, and he thought it possible that some inconvenience might result from two colonies having the same name. Arthur Mills, a backbencher interested in colonial affairs, confessed that he had initially thought that parliament was being called upon to legislate for a French colony, and told the story of a governor who had left England to take up his new appointment, only to return some months later unable to find it. Robert Lowe, a former Australian colonist, returned to the charge of duplication, adding that he supposed Nova Scotia had much the same meaning, and urged Lytton to "hit upon some other name that was not quite so much used up." Another MP suggested that the grateful colonists should adopt the name of Lytton, and a Yorkshire manufacturer told of a letter addressed to his firm in Halifax which had been sent via Nova Scotia. As *The Times* remarked, no one knew much "of these ultra-occidental regions."[5]

The parliamentary criticism of New Caledonia was not an isolated phenomenon. It was a common joke that the British public was ignorant of the world in general, and of colonial geography in particular, and much of the blame was put on confusing and imitative names. J.A. Roebuck, in 1849, had urged that colonies be given "really new, and thereby *distinguishing* names."[6] Edward Wakefield, father of the

[3]Hertfordshire County Record Office, Lytton Papers, D/EK 027, Queen Victoria to Lytton, 27 June 1858.

[4]*The Times*, 28 June, 9 July 1858.

[5]*Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, cli, 8 July 1858, cols. 1096-1121; *The Times*, 9 July 1858.

[6]J.A. Roebuck, *The Colonies of England* (London 1849), p. 119n. Castlereagh was alleged to have given up Java in 1815 because he did not know where it was, but did not like to admit it. Palmerston, according to legend, asked a Colonial Office clerk to "show me where these places are." The duke of Cambridge, asked to locate Fernando Po, replied "How the deuce should I know?" *The Times*, 10 July 1858; J.A. Froude, *Oceana* (London, 1886), pp. 11-12; D. Thomas, *Charge! Hurrah! Hurrah! A Life of Cardigan of Balaclava* (London, 1976), pp. 334-335.

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emigration theorist, had offered similar advice to New Zealand colonists in 1843:

> The thing is to avoid common names, and never name a place the same as with us. Everybody is tired of "New"—your New Yorks, New London, New Orleans, New Plymouth, etc. Before a place is named, examine a Gazeteer [sic] and avoid the same names as you find in it.[7]

There was even a groundswell of opposition to creating a catch question in the civil service examinations about the whereabouts of New Caledonia.[8]

For the time being, however, familiarity seemed to have bred a reluctant acceptance by the time of the committee stage on 12 July. There were suggestions of "Pacifica" (by analogy with Australia) and of Drake's "New Albion," while Roebuck recommended the anglicisation of some Indian name. Lytton expressed no enthusiasm for these alternatives, but indicated that a change might be made.[9] In fact, when the Commons resumed its committee meetings on 19 July, Labouchere, Gladstone, and Lord John Russell all spoke of New Caledonia without any recorded hint of disdain, but there were disquieting signs of an attack building over the fact rather than the name of the new colony. Colonial issues lent themselves to domestic party battles, and criticism of the suggested arbitrary form of government in New Caledonia could be the excuse needed to unite Whigs and Peelites against the Conservative ministry. On 19 July Gladstone attacked the arbitrary form of government which Lytton proposed for the new colony.[10] Yet Lytton was committed to his bill, and could manage little more than cosmetic changes. One obvious change was the abandonment of the name New Caledonia, which would help rid the measure of its aura of amateurishness, and remove a possible focus for criticism.

In broaching this delicate subject with the Queen, Lytton laid much stress on reported French objections, passing over the unwittingly disloyal sentiments of MPs. The Queen was asked if she would graciously select a less confusing name—"such as 'New Cornwall' which was the old geographical Designation—or whatever other name might suggest itself to your Majesty." He added that the bill was to be introduced into the House of Lords in three days time, and that it would be convenient for the government to announce the change then.

The Queen's reply, despatched the following day, is almost certain-

[7]E. Wakefield to W. Wakefield, 30 October 1853, Sydney, Mitchell Library, Wakefield Correspondence (typescript), A3094.
[8]*The Times*, 9 July 1858.
[9]*Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, cli, 12 July 1858, cols. 1347-1348.
[10]Ibid., 19 July 1858, cols. 1762-1770.

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ly an example of Albert's careful brain. It pointed out that although New Hanover, New Cornwall and New Georgia all appeared on maps of the region, "the only name which is given to the whole territory in every map the Queen has consulted is 'Columbia'." However, there was already "a Columbia /sic/ in South America and the Citizens of the United States call their country also Columbia at least in poetry." The Queen therefore suggested "British Columbia," thus tactfully rescuing the government from artificial novelties. Lytton gratefully seized upon the royal brainwave, believing that "great additional popularity would be given to the Colony itself" as a result of its new title. To cover ministers against possible attack for indecision, he asked special permission for his under-secretary, Lord Carnarvon, "to state that the name now substituted was graciously selected, or sanctioned, by your Majesty."[11] Specifying only that she assumed the prime minister had been consulted, the Queen assented to the announcement.[12] Lytton had apparently already written to Derby, summing up the argument for involving the Queen in support of British Columbia: "By stating it as the choice of the Queen all objection will cease. By not stating it, plenty of objections may be made—which it would be more respectful to her Majesty to prevent if possible."[13] The prime minister evidently agreed. *The Times* of 26 July, the day of the debate in the House of Lords, showed just how wise Lytton had been in forestalling and deflecting criticism. Reversing its earlier opinion altogether, it suggested that governing anarchic goldfields with the probable complication of Indian wars was a prospect to be regarded "with very little satisfaction." Unease about this new venture in colonial expansion was obviously building up, and needed only a focus to explode. That focus was not hard to find. "Strife waits upon the birth of this unsought accession to our dominions," wrote *The Times,* "and we begin to quarrel about its very name . . . . Why perplex geographers and multiply the future miseries of future candidates for the Civil Service by creating this most superfluous ambiguity, as repugnant to good taste as it is to common sense?" It objected strongly to labelling "portions of the earth's surface at least as ancient as our own /with

[11]Lytton to Queen Victoria, 23 July 1858 (Royal Archives, RA/B17/54), 24 July 1858 (Royal Archives, RA/B17/55), 25 July 1858 (Royal Archives, RA/B17/56).

[12]Queen Victoria to Lytton, 26 July 1858, Lytton Papers, D/EK 027 (copy in Royal Archives, RA/B17/57).

[13]Lytton to Derby, "Saturday morning" (24 July 1858), Derby Papers, 162/1. The papers of the 14th earl of Derby are on loan to Lord Blake, Queen's College Oxford, who kindly gave me access to them.

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British names/ qualified by the inappropriate epithet of 'new'."[14]

Later that day, Lord Carnarvon announced that the Queen had been "pleased to order" the change of name to British Columbia, although he made a formal defense of the legitimacy of the original choice. Although the Duke of Newcastle, another former Colonial Secretary, did not think British Columbia was "either very felicitous or very original," the matter was dropped and the bill quickly passed its remaining stages, securing the royal assent on 2 August.[15] The preamble to the act showed clear signs of the scissors-and-paste approach, referring to "wild and unoccupied Territories on the North-west Coast of *British America,* commonly known by the Designation of *New Caledonia,* and from and after the passing of this Act to be named *British Columbia.*" It is not altogether surprising that *The Times* should have absent-mindedly referred to 'New Columbia' a few weeks later.[16]

A year later British Columbia stood high in public favour, with even *The Times* again reversing its position, noting that "the young establishment on the Pacific coast" had become "quite a favourite" since the discovery of gold, and had even supplanted New Zealand in the minds of educated Englishmen planning to emigrate.[17] There was, however, one blot which affronted the colonial secretary. The lieutenant-governor, Colonel Moody, had laid out the site of a mainland capital, and had christened it "Queensborough." Lytton reacted violently to the name, damning it as "prosaic /and/ the quintessence of vulgarity,"[18] and on 7 April 1859 he wrote to the Queen asking her to select a replacement. Without mentioning the offending "temporary name" he expressed his confidence that the Queen would agree that it was "capable of amendment in point of significance and dignity." Lytton was sure that "British Columbia will become one of the most important possessions of the Crown," and an asset to Great Britain: "Its capital may thus become of no ordinary mark in the future history of the World" and "its very name" could become a symbol of the vast progress made during the Queen's reign. He also asked the Queen to select a name for the new Australian colony which was to be formed by detaching the Moreton Bay district from New South Wales: he thought a name "directly associated with your

[14] *The Times,* 26 July 1858.
[15] *Parliamentary Debates,* 3rd series, cli, 26 July 1858, cols. 2097-2103, and royal assent, 2 August 1858, col. 2359.
[16] 21 & 22 Vic. Cap. xcix, preamble; *The Times,* 28 August 1858.
[17] *The Times,* 1 April 1859.
[18] Ormsby, *British Columbia,* pp. 174-175.

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Majesty's person" would be popular.[19] Two weeks later he submitted a short-list of three names to replace Queensborough. First came Regina—"the word is so easily pronounced, and its meaning so familiarly known that its latinity may be forgiven." An alternative was Augusta, which had "an imperial signification /and was/ also the poetical name for London." Third came New Westminster. Lytton believed there was no town of that name either in the United States or the colonies, "and as being at once familiar to English associations, and transplanting to new shores the name of the most antient /sic/, the most historical and, so to speak, the most regal district of the Metropolis, it may not be unworthy of Consideration." He also pressed her for a name for Moreton Bay, but made no suggestions.

Queen Victoria made the best of what must have seemed a bad job by choosing New Westminster. For Moreton Bay she offered the alternatives of "Queen's Land" or "Saxon Land."[20] Lytton put the best face on it that he could manage, assuring her that both names were excellent, but expressing his belief that "the Colonists would find a peculiar pride in those associations which are conveyed by the name of Queen's Land." After his specific request for a regal name he had little alternative. At one stroke Queensborough was expunged on one side of the Pacific, while Queensland was enthroned on the other.[21] Perhaps it was merely coincidence, but on the same day Lytton tried, for the third time in a year, to be allowed to resign on grounds of ill health.[22]

The naming of British Columbia hardly throws much light on the political role of the monarchy in nineteenth century British politics, but it does illustrate the careless and hasty manner in which the new Pacific colony was created. The Queen was given less than a week to select New Caledonia, and three days to think of a substitute when it proved unpopular. No one seemed to notice that the name British Columbia would saddle the new colony with archaic initials. New Westminster, chosen from an indifferent short-list, not only flouted

[19]Lytton to Queen Victoria, 7 April 1859, Royal Archives, RA/P22/52.

[20]Lytton to Queen Victoria, 24 April 1859, Ibid., RA/P22/53, and undated note by Queen.

[21]Lytton to Queen Victoria, 3 May 1859, Ibid., RA/P22/54.

[22]Lytton to Derby, 3 May 1859, Derby Papers, 162/1. It is not clear whether the Queen knew Queensborough was the offending title and chose Queensland deliberately or unwittingly. She had apparently approved the renaming of the Cove of Cork as Queenstown in 1849. ed. *The Letters of Queen Victoria (1837-1861)*, A. C. Benson and Lord Esher (3 vols.; London, 1908), II: 225.

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the general distaste for combinations of "New"; for many, the royal associations of Westminster were probably counter-balanced by those of parliament—hardly a tactful choice for a colony which had been refused representative institutions. Yet, while most of the decisions made about the new colony in 1858-1859 have long since been superseded and obliterated, the names, however casually chosen, remain as the legacy of a Queen and her minister.

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